

The Vortex: Britain's Machine-Age Rebellion

A short-lived, explosive movement that declared war on the past and was consumed by the future it celebrated.

IN JUNE 1914, A NEW MOVEMENT EXPLODED ONTO THE BRITISH ART SCENE.

One month before the start of World War I, Wyndham Lewis launched Vorticism with a manifesto in a shocking pink magazine called *BLAST*. The name, coined by poet Ezra Pound, described a vortex as “the silent centre of a whirlpool where all energy concentrates.”

Vorticists rejected traditional landscapes and nudes. They championed an art of the machine age: bold colours, sharp angles, and industrial subjects.

Lewis led the pack, signing the manifesto with ten others, including Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Edward Wadsworth, William Roberts, and two pioneering women, Helen Saunders and Jessica Dismorr.



THE MODERN CITY WAS A DEHUMANIZED, INDUSTRIAL MACHINE.

Wyndham Lewis, the movement's founder, saw the urban crowd as a mechanical mass. In his painting *The Crowd* (originally titled *Revolution*), tiny, schematic figures fill a geometric cityscape of factories and office blocks.

Lewis was known for his arrogance and abrasive personality. He founded Vorticism after a bitter quarrel with Roger Fry's Omega Workshops, establishing the short-lived Rebel Art Centre as its headquarters. The *BLAST* manifesto, which he wrote, blessed England for its "ships, steep factory walls and its achievement as an industrial island machine," while blasting the entire Victorian period.



SOME SAW THE MACHINE NOT AS A GOD, BUT AS A DEHUMANIZING FORCE.

David Bomberg, born to Polish-Jewish immigrants in London's East End, was expelled from the Slade School for being too audacious. He exhibited with the Vorticists but refused to officially join, keeping his distance.



While Vorticism celebrated industrialization, Bomberg used its geometric language to show how it shatters and dehumanizes the individual. In *The Mud Bath*, painted when he was 23, the human figures in a Whitechapel bathhouse are reduced to a frenetic collision of white and blue geometric forms against a shocking red background. He famously recalled that horses pulling the local bus would shy away from the painting.

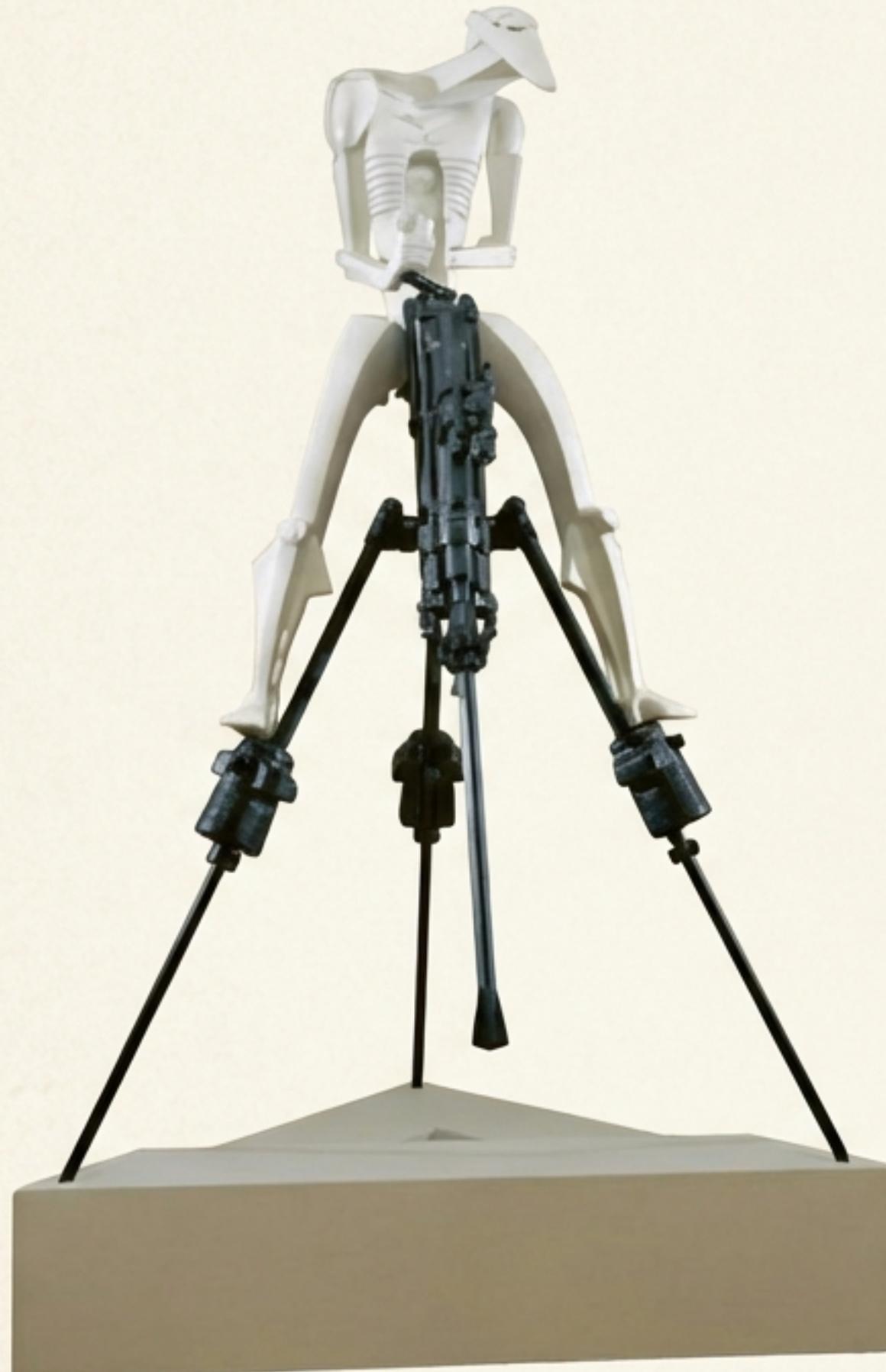


VORTICIST ENERGY, FROZEN IN STONE.

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was a self-taught prodigy who, in three and a half years of impoverished life in London, produced thousands of drawings and over a hundred sculptures.

His *Red Stone Dancer* strips away individuality for pure energy. The dancer's triangular face and twisting body show the influence of African and Oceanic sculpture from the British Museum. Ezra Pound called it "nearly a thesis on pure form."

In September 1914, Gaudier-Brzeska enlisted in the French army. He was killed by a German bullet to the forehead on June 5, 1915. He was twenty-three.



THE APEX OF VORTICISM: A PROPHETIC, MECHANICAL MONSTER.

American-born sculptor Jacob Epstein never signed the manifesto but created Vorticism's most radical work. His *Rock Drill* is a menacing plaster robot straddling an actual pneumatic drill. Epstein described it as “the armed sinister figure of today and tomorrow... the terrible Frankenstein’s monster we have made ourselves into.” Inside its ribcage, he placed a tiny, protected foetus. The combination of a carved figure and a ready-made industrial object was terrifyingly new. Exhibited in 1915, it embodied the movement’s short-lived, aggressive love affair with the power of the machine age.



THE MOVEMENT'S RADICAL VOICES WERE NOT ALL MEN.

Helen Saunders was one of the first British artists to work in a purely non-figurative style. Her work is a dynamic explosion of colour and sharp diagonal lines.

She signed the *BLAST* manifesto as 'H. Sanders' to avoid embarrassing her conventional family, and the magazine's second issue was distributed from her flat.

Tragically, none of her Vorticist oil paintings survive. Her sister reportedly used one to cover a larder floor, where it was worn to destruction. Fewer than 200 of her works are known today.

A LOST MASTERPIECE, HIDDEN FOR A CENTURY.



The Surface: *Praxitella* by Wyndham Lewis, 1921



The Discovery: *Atlantic City* by Helen Saunders, c. 1915

In 2022, a 'flabbergasting' discovery was made. Using X-ray analysis, two Courtauld students found Helen Saunders' lost painting *Atlantic City* hidden beneath a 1921 work by Wyndham Lewis, *Praxitella*. Saunders and Lewis had been extremely close, but their friendship ended badly after the war. Short on money and materials, Lewis reused her canvas. This act of obliteration, whether driven by spite or pragmatism, has come to symbolize the way women artists were written out of history. The Courtauld now displays the X-ray reconstruction alongside Lewis's portrait.

A STORY OF PRIVILEGE, TRAUMA, AND ART.

Jessica Dismorr came from a wealthy family, which allowed her to study at the Slade and in Paris. She signed the manifesto and contributed poetry and drawings to *BLAST*.

Abstract Composition is one of only two of her Vorticist paintings known to survive. Her other major works were lost or destroyed.

During WWI, Dismorr served as a nurse in France and suffered a severe nervous breakdown in 1920, likely PTSD.

On August 29, 1939, five days before Britain declared war on Germany, Dismorr died by suicide. Her marginalization by the art world and the imminent threat of another world war are often cited as triggers.





THE MACHINE THEY CELEBRATED WAS UNLEASHED.

Vorticism lasted barely a year as an active movement. World War I scattered the artists. The very forces of industry and mechanization they had championed were now directed towards unprecedented slaughter.

Edward Wadsworth, a Vorticist signatory, found his skills repurposed for the war effort. He supervised the painting of 'Dazzle' camouflage on over 4,000 ships. The abstract patterns were not meant to hide the vessels, but to confuse enemy U-boats, making it difficult to judge a ship's speed and direction.

Vorticist abstraction was now a tool of survival.

THE VORTICIST STYLE CONFRONTS MECHANIZED SLAUGHTER.

Artists who served on the front lines were appointed as official war artists. Their work documents the profound shift in their perspective. The machine was no longer a symbol of progress; it was an engine of death.



Wyndham Lewis (Royal Artillery): In *A Battery Shelled*, his experience at Ypres transforms geometric forms from celebratory to horrific. It marks his turning away from Vorticist enthusiasm.



William Roberts (Royal Artillery): In *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*, his signature tubular, Cubist style is used to depict the pure horror of chemical warfare.

AN OFFICIAL DEMAND: "NO MORE FUTURIST ABORTIONS."

After the war, Britain rejected avant-garde excess. For artists, this meant pressure to abandon abstraction.

David Bomberg served as a sapper on the Western Front, losing his brother and friends. The Canadian War Memorials Fund commissioned a painting of his experience, but rejected his first version, calling it a "futurist abortion." Furious but needing the commission, Bomberg complied. The final version of *Sappers at Work* retains simplified forms, but is far more representational. The war had shattered his faith in the machine age, and the post-war world had little appetite for his pre-war radicalism. His reputation catastrophically declined.



THE MACHINE GOD, BROKEN AND DEFEATED.



After the war, Jacob Epstein could no longer stand his creation. He dismantled the original *Rock Drill*, sold the drill itself, and cut off the figure's arms and legs. He cast only the truncated torso in bronze. The menacing robot was now a defenceless, melancholic victim. The foetus within its ribs had vanished.

This violated, abbreviated form is evocative of the wounded soldiers returning from the trenches. It represents Epstein's—and modernism's—turning away from the machine age. The prophetic figure had become a warning.



AN EPITAPH IN BRONZE

‘BLAST’ published only two issues. The single Vorticist exhibition in 1915 was a commercial failure. Gaudier-Brzeska was dead. The war scattered the remaining artists. Wyndham Lewis’s attempt to revive the movement in 1920 failed. Britain entered a ‘return to order,’ favouring traditional art over the avant-garde.

Yet Vorticism’s influence endured. It was British art’s first sustained engagement with European abstraction. It pioneered a bold graphic design that still resonates today.

For one brief, explosive moment, British artists stood at the vanguard of modernism. Epstein’s ‘Torso’ stands as the movement’s final statement: a powerful, tragic monument to a future that could have been.